

CIIBlight (CUBA II)

Notes on JG Blight, Fear and Learning in a Nuclear Crisis, August 23 (Sunday), 1987

60: WWI was not just an example of deterrence that failed. The outbreak of WWI was an episode in which both the structural and procedural measures that were meant to produce deterrence--the static and dynamic underpinnings of the deterrent threats, the implementation of deterrent policies--contributed and led directly to the onset of war, made it likely and then inescapable, produced the failure of deterrence.

What was involved was, as now, a mixture of "deterrent" and "compellent" threats, corresponding to Type I and Type II deterrence, the former relating to the deterrence of direct attack on one's own country, the latter to the protection or advancement of foreign policy goals outside one's country. These interacted, in an explosive way.

--JGB rarely, perhaps never, acknowledges two incentives for the initiation or escalation of a nuclear war by "rational" leaders:  
1) damage-limiting by offensive use, essentially by preemption against offensive capabilities and command and control;  
2) unilateral tactical use to win a limited war against a non-nuclear opponent or an opponent who foregoes retaliation (or limits it sharply).

Neither of these offers any guarantee of remaining limited or of limiting damage significantly in general war; but neither can be proved to be wholly, certainly infeasible or unrewarding (especially considering the possibility of effective and paralyzing decapitation, in the case of damage-limiting; and of restraint by the opponent's nuclear-armed ally, in the other case).

Given the hypothetical possibility that either of these incentives could look less catastrophic than its immediate alternatives--and the actual history of crises in which the latter circumstances came close to arising--it is simply not literally true that the leaders of nuclear states (the US, at least) have ever accepted what Blight calls "the central lesson of the nuclear age and of the Cuban missile crisis": that "nuclear war must never be fought." Not only does the US prepare and threaten to take such initiatives in possible circumstances, of a sort that have come close to arising in the past, but at least some leaders have given every sign of being able and willing to contemplate carrying out the existing plans in some circumstances.

"Must not be fought" then means, not "Must not be initiated under any imaginable circumstances, whatever the plans and threats and commitments have said," but rather, "Must be avoided if at all possible--unless necessary in the light of our interests and

obligations, the state of threat warnings, and the nature of alternatives; circumstances which would make nuclear war necessary or optimal are to be avoided, if possible. But if they nevertheless arise...."

It is not exactly an "error" to suppose that an opponent might not respond to our nuclear attack on its client or ally; nor is it an "error" or "miscalculation" to gamble on this possibility, if failure of our hopes has been foreseen as a possibility and its probability has been estimated in some "reasonable" relation to evidence and premises, none of which may be "mistaken," though the evidence is subject to "noise" and uncertainty. If the opponent does respond, the resulting war is rather misleadingly described as "inadvertent," since the consequences of actions may be--though undesired--not unforeseen, but rather (perhaps imprudently, unwisely) accepted as possibilities, even probabilities. (If I lose all my money at the racetrack, is this always well described as "inadvertent"?)

Errors of perception and reasoning and prediction, and loss of control--by central authority, or even by all human agency--are real possibilities and sources of nuclear risk; but in the light of the above incentives on both sides, they are not the only source on either side. They were not so seen in the Missile Crisis, nor are they so seen since.

JGB is almost mute about the actions that were most likely to initiate nuclear war (aside from the possibility that a low-level Soviet or Cuban would attack the US without higher orders, true "inadvertence" from the point of view of central authorities). These would nearly all be US actions; and probably not by subordinates but by Presidential decision. Where is the "inadvertence"? Possible, but not even primary. Nor need the Soviet actions that led to this US decision be clear "errors" or "miscalculations": they could be conscious gambles, in which the risks, clearly seen, were reasonably calculated, and the willingness to accept the risks reflective of long- and widely-accepted evaluations of national interest. Misperceptions--as distinct from uncertainties and willingness to gamble--are not necessary to this result on either side.

--JGB's whole exposition suggests that what is being explained is a willingness by JFK, in the final stage of the evolving crisis, to compromise on what were previously seen as essential demands, to back away from previous commitments and threats, in order to settle the conflict without violence.

The explanation of this supposed, and supposedly problematic decision is his rapidly increasing awareness during the crisis of the risk that either he or Khrushchev would soon lose control of events and become incapable of avoiding war, perhaps even all-out war, with the latter possibility becoming, inevitably, unprecedently vivid and abhorrent to him, controlling his



responses--basically, making him incapable of actions that maintained or increased the risks of armed conflict--in a way that can be predicted to be almost inevitable in future, equally severe nuclear crises, in contrast to past non-nuclear crises that did lead to war).

The actual history of the crisis, including parts "strangely" underemphasized by Blight (as well as parts he could not know), lends little support to this explanation or prediction, since the premise is counterfactual; JFK made no such decision or response. The closest he came to it was to postpone the previously-agreed response to the U-2 shootdown (which he had not expected to occur), committing himself (more strongly than before) to carry it out on the next occurrence. And he did wish to settle the conflict immediately, rather than let it drag on: and in large part, for fear of eventual loss of control, before long, by either Khrushchev or himself.

But the step he took was to increase, not reduce, the level of confrontation, to sharpen the threat and give it a short deadline, to make (for the first time) an ultimatum: whose seriousness as a coercive threat is precisely indicated, among other things, by Robert Kennedy's refusal to acknowledge to Dobrynin that it was an ultimatum or to make it public (either of which would have made it much harder, or impossible, for the Soviets to accept).

Unless JGB believed that Khrushchev "had" to back down in face of this--which he doesn't, and JFK didn't--this increased the risk of war with the Soviet Union. "Objectively," i.e., from the point of view of a well-informed observer who knew what JFK did not, this risk had been increased to near-certainty unless Khrushchev backed down within 12 hours (which he did), since Castro was highly likely (he felt certain) to succeed in shooting down one or more of the low-altitude planes that were scheduled for the following day, as well as having an uncertain possibility of firing another SAM.

JGB seems to be impressed by the fact that JFK was more moderate in his policy than LeMay--or even Maxwell Taylor--that he ignores the fact that Kennedy did not compromise at all in his essential demand that the missiles must go, nor did he make a concession on the Turkish missiles--that they could be traded publicly--which might have persuaded Khrushchev to settle without the specific, secret fear of Castro's action.

It was only Khrushchev, not Kennedy, who made essential concessions to end the crisis, and he (almost surely) did it because of specific expectations of loss of control unknown to Blight (or Kennedy).

The lesson of Kennedy's behavior is his unwillingness to compromise despite his fear of nuclear war, inadvertent or US-chosen; and his willingness to make threats to deter certain

actions, without even considering the possibility--which happened to be the case--that these actions were not under the control of the opponent he was threatening. (This despite the fact that he did consider the possibility that this opponent might lose control of other sorts of actions under future circumstances).

Thus, even without knowledge of the SAM situation (given which, there is little that needs explaining in Khrushchev's behavior, i.e., his backdown) JGB's whole argument would seem relevant, and plausible, in explaining Khrushchev's, not Kennedy's, behavior in the end-game. (Why they took the earlier gambles they did, and persisted in them so long, would still need explaining). From JGB's point of view, what needs explaining is why JFK was still gambling and newly threatening on Saturday afternoon, October 27! For this he has no explanation.

His approach could also be used to explain JFK's behavior after the missile crisis, after Khrushchev backed down. (119)

What is demonstrated is:

- The real risk of loss of control, inadvertent war.
- The risk that fear of loss of control will lead to new threats and commitments, aggressive initiatives (in order to win the crisis before loss of control: which may even have already occurred, without the threatener's awareness).
- The real risk of catalytic war. (Regarded as near-impossible by many theorists of rational action who believe in superpower prudence and strategic stability).
- The risk that fear of nuclear war and of loss of control will not result in a willingness to stop gambling, to compromise, to withdraw and desist from threatening, commitments, preparations for attack (it may, as above, even lead to increasing the stakes and making new threats).
- It may not be the US leader who is most prudent, most impressed by the risk of inadvertence or of nuclear war (It was not, in this case, contrary to Blight's assumption that "both" were, with the analysis concentrating exclusively, wrongly, on Kennedy).
- JGB's analysis does explain one party's behavior--a different party from the one he discusses, and for reasons he only partly knows--and thus shows how future crises could/might be resolved without violence. But since this reasoning does not, contrary to his claim, apply to both participants--specifically, not to the one he examines, not to "our side"--it does not give us the degree of reassurance he claims that future crises will end without nuclear war.

It may indeed be the case that all participants will feel the kind of fear he postulates (though it seems that his interviews since this book was written have turned up a number of high-level participants who failed to feel or validate this fear). But all it would take for war to occur next time would be for both sides to behave as Kennedy actually did! (And this without claiming that Kennedy was "irrational" in any sense of the word that Blight



would accept. However, if JGB really faced up to what JFK really did--especially in the light of the actual circumstances, not known to Kennedy but not all that difficult to imagine as a possibility, which Kennedy failed to do--he might want to expand his notions of "irrationality," or "immorality," in the area of gambles.

The actual US phenomenon to be explained is why JFK suddenly made an ultimatum, on the night of Oct 27. "Why the hurry," as Blight asked. To this, it is true, JFK's fear of events slipping out of the leaders' control was relevant, crucial; but it combined with his continued determination (which Blight does not examine critically) to end the crisis with victory, to achieve his basic demands, despite the risk (which he had just heightened and foreshortened), to cause him, in the face of danger, to "flee forward": a response familiar in the trench warfare of WWI.

Thus, to this question, JGB points to an important explaining variable; but its effect on US behavior was just opposite to what his overall argument presumes. In light of this argument, the question to JGB is: Why didn't JFK simply accept the 27 OCT Khrushchev proposal, to trade the Turkish missiles. That is, to do so without making a crucial modification that the trade be secret and denied by both sides (which shifted the perception of the outcome, when Khrushchev unexpectedly accepted the modified proposal, from being "fair" or even a Khrushchev victory to being an unequivocal Soviet defeat, which later cost K his job).

JGB clearly supposes that it was JFK's concessions, not his threats (which were simply "inherent in the situation, in his past decisions, a statement of fact, not a threat," i.e., not his responsibility as of Oct. 27 (irreversible? Khrushchev managed to reverse the irreversible quickly enough when he got scared)) that resolved the crisis. (e.g. 165: or, this whole chapter). But in fact (!) these concessions probably had no effect at all on the resolution; they did nothing to make Khrushchev's backdown more palatable or easier for him to make; he couldn't even refer to them at home. (i.e. the Turkish missiles. The no-invasion pledge wasn't worth much in itself, and was effectively withdrawn soon). Castro not only was not impressed, he was furious, for years.

It was the threat that was crucial, and probably necessary to the outcome. And the fear of loss of control by JFK was probably not only salient, it was effective in influencing him to make this threat. That is, this fear (along with a continued fear of losing face, an intense desire to avoid humiliation) probably was important in helping JFK overcome his immediate fear of, his reluctance to issue an ultimatum! (The latter was second only to his fear of launching an immediate attack: a decision he postponed, by his ultimatum, for 48 hours).

JFK did act to reduce the risks, in this sense: he figured that without the ultimatum--but given his so-far-unquestioned determination to have the missiles removed, and his unwillingness,

still late Saturday night, to make a public trade of the Turkish missiles or give up Guantanamo (Stevenson's "shameful" proposal, and Castro's preference for a deal: see Szulc)--the risks of war in the next few days would be even higher than they would be with the explicit, private ultimatum-and-offer. He may even have been willing to go beyond this offer--Rusk told Blair that he was preparing to consider accepting an "offer" from U Thant to make the public trade, later, if necessary, if K rejected the ultimatum. What he didn't know, and didn't figure into his possibilities, was that the situation was already beyond his control, made so by a combination of Castro's initiative on the SAMS and the AA and his ultimatum. So far, he still accepted the picture of the general Neustadt quotes at RAND, after the crisis, that "Khrushchev was rational"--and in full control. He was wrong.

JGB addresses (167) why the participants remain "ambivalent" about the role of dread, of risk and fear of inadvertent war, of loss of control, or simply the risk of war. I suggest that some of these participants--e.g., McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Sorensen--otherwise have values and a perspective that makes it very hard for them to explain, to understand, to live with, the fact that it was Khrushchev, and not they or their President, who backed down and made decisive concessions, in face of shared risks that they, in fact, put as high as he did.

My own immediate reaction on hearing how high JFK put these risks was: "How could he have done what he did?" (And left undone what he did). (I didn't agree with that estimate, any more than Schelling does now; I was wrong, as Tom apparently still is). But the members of the Gang of 4 (for no first use) must still be asking themselves: "How could I?"

They tell themselves, blindly, that they weren't making nuclear threats, at least; yet another question they would have to face, if they were more realistic, is how they could have been willing to continue a process that would lead to US-initiated nuclear war if it led to nuclear war at all, which apparently, like the President, they put at a high probability.

(No wonder McGeorge Bundy was so vehement when he first heard me say that Kennedy had made nuclear threats, pounding the table to deny it. It was not just Kennedy; he had gone along.) The threat was not more definite--but not less so--than in 1973. I suspect the crisis was not actually less dangerous in 1973, though less public. Probably, the later crew was less anguished about it; and had, indeed, less time to reflect on the actual risks.

Actually, this may be why they remain so surprised that Khrushchev did back down, and find it puzzling to this day. They can't admit that they should have; they prefer to think that it was "impossible, unthinkable" for either side to do, by that time, what Khrushchev did do. (They didn't, and don't, perceive Khrushchev to have been a coward, or panicked. And they specifically reject the notion--underrating it, in fact--that



nuclear asymmetry was a decisive factor. So why did K quit? It has to remain problematic; or else they must face the question: Why didn't they? (Their whole understanding of the nuclear era and balance emphasizes its practical symmetry, even in 1962 or earlier. I don't agree with them on that; yet now that I appreciate the real uncertainties in warfare, and the psychological propensities of ruling elites, I see great risks in the crisis despite the great asymmetry in US favor. And I hope and believe that, understanding that then, I would have urgently advised concessions. I have some basis for supposing that I would have done so. They did not.]

Blair clearly has a strong desire to absolve, and admire, JFK (and these now-dovish advisors). Else how could he so systematically ignore that JFK made a dual decision during Saturday: a) he chose not to strike immediately against the SAM site that had fired, changing his earlier plan, while committing himself to continue recon and strike immediately after the next shootdown; this is what Blair focusses exclusively on, along with his decision to offer a private trade of the missiles (worthless, in prospect and in the event);

(b) he chose to postpone an offer that--Rusk told Blair--he was actually willing to make, or to contemplate, but "not yet"; instead he explicitly rejected this offer (for a public trade of the missiles), with no hint that he might later change his mind, that it was negotiable. That was the equivalent of Truman's deciding, at Potsdam, not to carry out his assurance to Grew and others that he would make the Japanese an explicit offer to keep the Emperor, even though he was privately willing to accept that and in the end did accept it.

To say (as Blair did in his letter to me) that Kennedy was willing to do that, is to say that Robert Kennedy's assertion that the missiles would be struck inexorably in 48 hours if they were not removed, and that the Turkish missiles were non-negotiable (in public) were not statements of fact. They were, indeed, false, in the Kennedy brothers' eyes (though, for reasons unknown to them, they might have come true!). They thought they were in control of their own actions (or else, by Blair's own reasoning, they could hardly have postponed the offer they were willing to make if the ultimatum failed).

In other words, it was unequivocally an ultimatum; perhaps a bluff, but definitely not a simple "statement of fact." (p. 168) This much, by the way, is obvious from the well-known facts of the case (as nearly all the participants acknowledge); Blair's description of it seems blatantly to be psychological denial on his part, for whatever reason.

As for their public denials of the existence of great fear on their part: they hardly wish to face the question of why they were willing to incur such risks, on the part of the nation! (How do

they explain it to themselves?) (p. 168 The same for Khrushchev (p. 170))

--Some of the surprises to participants:

--K's decision to put missiles in.

--K's "lies."

--K's decision to take the missiles out: so quickly, without temporizing about Turkish missiles, other offers or threats.

--Thus, that the crisis was resolved (successfully) so soon: rather than after months, and without violence.

--JGB 179: Failure of SU to respond forcefully to Pres speech, or to onset of blockade; turnaround of Sov ships.

--Speedup of events on Saturday, 27 Oct: and events themselves, including ultimatum.

--Aspects not known to the public.

--Actual strategic balance.

--near-certainty that missiles would be discovered before they were operational. (Why no camouflage? No use of SAMS? Why the rush to complete? Why did the odds look acceptable to K, given this: during the decision period; and especially, after JFK's threats?)

--The fact that many of the decision-makers put the odds of war as high as the most worried members of the public (yet went ahead: they didn't publicize their fear so as not to have to explain this during the crisis, or afterward). Also, the vividness of the fears of nuclear war by some, such as Pres and McN.

--Presidential, and other, certainty that the crisis would spread to Berlin and Turkey if they invaded.

--The Mongoose campaign--which gave some credibility to K's claim of protection for Cuba.

(Lack of awareness of this meant K got even less credit for winning any concession from the no-invasion pledge; made it look more like a victory for US).

--The assassination campaign against Castro (Mafia, CIA).

--JCS desire to invade Cuba.

--McNamara (Taylor) judgement that the missiles in Cuba were not strategically important ((yet they did reduce American superiority, to something like parity: especially if in large numbers. McN downplays significance of this, but SU did not))



9

--JFK awareness of the symmetry of the Turkish missile situation, frustration at failure to remove them earlier, willingness to defuse missiles, trade them privately, even trade them publicly if necessary (but decision to wait to do this: which led to a win, unsullied by resentment in Turkey/NATO except, later, for France, and by opposition in JCS and right; but which might have led to war, if Castro had moved before K did).

--K's timing of move in relation to elections: based on past reasons to believe that US President might have "collaborated" in keeping movement secret before elections. (But did he underestimate pressure on Pres to invade Cuba, and possible willingness of Pres to "lead" that movement before the elections?)

--JFK/RFK ultimatum: two parts.

--JFK/RFK offer on Turkish missiles, on condition of secrecy.

--Who shot down the U2. (Still not known by EXCOMM)

--Castro's claims after the crisis that he had shot down.

--Shootdown of low-level plane on the 5th.

--Fomin offer (on the night of the 26th): to which RFK was really responding, not the K letter of the 26th. (Not known to most EXCOMM, including McCone.)

--Stevenson (and still secretly, Rusk!) willingness to deal, to give up Guantanamo (Castro condition for deal) and/or Turkish missiles. (See Katzenbach). See C:CII\Blight.1

Memcon: James G. Blight, Executive Director, Center for Science and Technology, Kennedy School, Harvard, August 26, 1987.

1. Rusk revealed in a letter to Blight in March, 1987 (to be revealed this Sunday in the times by Tony Lukas) that JFK had told him to prepare to have U Thant ask the US and Soviets to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis by dismantling both the Cuban and the Turkish missiles: i.e., on the basis of "K's" letter of Saturday morning, 27 October, 1962.

I put the authorship of this letter in quotes, because many analysts have guessed--and the Excomm at the time judged--that it reflected a Politburo drafting, probably not by Khrushchev at all, overruling the much softer proposal implied in a letter of Friday night, 26 October, and spelled out in the Fomin-Scali conversations of Friday night. Given the tone of the Khrushchev letter, which suggested personal drafting by him, and the apparent authenticity of the Fomin representations, this suggested that as of Friday night (Saturday morning in Moscow) Khrushchev himself was ready to end the crisis on the basis of a US victory: ready to back down. (Only the JCS, the Miami Cubans and the parts of the CIA working with them would have seen a no-invasion pledge as compromising or negating a US victory: as they did in the event, Sunday and after).

But the Saturday letter, apparently countermanding the Friday night message on the basis of a corporate (sic) Kremlin decision, and public instead of private (constituting a position from which it would be hard to back down without great loss of prestige: as Khrushchev did suffer, apparently in the Kremlin itself), and accompanied by "Khrushchev's" decision to shoot down a U-2, seemed to confirm the hard line K had followed since the oncoming Soviet ships had stopped at the blockade line.

The transcript of the meetings of the Excomm on 27 October, transcribed by McGeorge Bundy in 1985, have now become available, cleared by the NSC. (Edited by Bundy? No one has any way to know. By the NSC?) (They will appear in the December issue of International Security). They reveal that Llewellyn Thompson--of great influence on the President--is the one who finally convinced the President that RFK's "ploy" might work, and was worth trying.

JFK was dubious that he could reply to the earlier letter, ignoring the later, tougher offer; after all, he said, the latter letter of that morning, the 27th, was public. "No, Mr. President, you're wrong," Thompson said, using almost unprecedented words. "This" (the letter of the 26th) is his offer," meaning that the previous one was Khrushchev's personal view.

That may have been true, but there was nothing to indicate, on Saturday, that it was still the Soviets' effective offer, and there was the shootdown to indicate otherwise. If Khrushchev personally wanted to deal on Kennedy's terms, why risk starting an



exchange of gunfire? Indeed, Herb Dinerstein speculates that "When the brinksmen realized, either from K's response to Russell or from K's private letter to Kennedy or from both, that their preferred strategy was to be abandoned for a retreat, they tried to save their policy by what the Soviet language would term a provocation--the shooting down of the U-2...Although we cannot say that the armed forces in this case tried to frustrate a concession by the Soviet Union on the missiles in Cuba, it was in character for the losers in the Soviet Union to stage a provocation to win a victory for their policy."

I am unaware of speculation elsewhere that the shootdown might not have been deliberately ordered by Khrushchev, or a result of a policy approved by him. Moreover, there is almost a total absence of speculation as to Khrushchev's motives in ordering it or permitting the shootdown; how it fitted into his strategy and expectations, how it related to the two letters, what response he anticipated.

The 27 October transcript now reveals, according to Blight, that no one raised the possibility, in any form, in the discussion in the ExComm on Saturday afternoon, after it was confirmed that the plane had been shot down and that the pilot was dead. Not only was it assumed with any question being raised that this was a Soviet action, it was likewise assumed that the decision had been made by Khrushchev himself.

As U. Alexis Johnson put it: "This is significant. These are Russians. They must want war!"

Throughout the crisis, and after, those who thought that there were few risks in taking a hard line and even knocking out the missiles with or without warning, based their confidence on the judgment that the Soviets must back down, eventually, because they were outgunned in the local area and confronted with overwhelmingly superior strategic nuclear force.

A problem with that view was that the Russians could make counterthreats elsewhere, in Berlin or Turkey, where their local superiority was just as great as the US enjoyed in the Caribbean (and, in the case of Turkey, with what seemed equivalent moral/legal arguments, except for "stealthy deployment"). The hawks thought that the probability of such challenge elsewhere was negligible, for the reason that they thought it could be easily countered by US first-use nuclear threats; to be sure, these too could be answered by Soviet tactical nuclear capabilities as large as the US (larger, in terms of MRBMs/IRBMs against Europe); but then, these would confront "overwhelming superiority."

Those who did not find US superiority overwhelming, in practical terms--e.g. Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, and probably the President--did not agree that the Soviets would be deterred by responding to an attack on Cuba by a challenge elsewhere, one they were not at all anxious to have to confront. (The shootdown of

the U-2, if ordered by Khrushchev as all agreed, would seem strongly to confirm this view of strong Soviet nerves and willingness to raise the risks and stakes.) Rusk says, according to Blight: "I would have given you a 99% probability that whatever we did, the Soviets would move on Berlin." He even went on to say, "I'll carry to my grave the question: Why didn't they?" (!)

(Nearly all present believed that the issue of the crisis was Berlin; "the crisis was about Berlin." Rusk was one of those who believed that US nuclear superiority "made no difference," so their advantage in the vicinity of Berlin was the same as ours in Cuba; he could see no reason why they would not be willing to confront us there as we were in Cuba.) )

But the certainty by all that Khrushchev was responsible for the shutdown derives, I'm sure, from two premises that were unquestioned by either hawks or doves:

(a) In the words of Nitze, "The Soviets are responsible." (Nitze's line of analysis of the Soviets, from the 1950 NSC-68 to the present, is that they coldly calculate the "correlation of forces," and are prepared to back off if confronted by determination and superior forces. This is likewise Nixon's view, and that of many who feel they learned it from the Missile Crisis itself).

As Blight said, those interviewed who made this point almost all accompanied by saying, by way of contrast, "The Soviets are not like the Ayatollah Khomeini, or Khadafy." The 1962 version of the Mad Satan, of course, was Castro. But all week Khrushchev had been assuring Kennedy, in private letters, not to worry about the flakey Castro: the missiles (and SAMS?) were in Soviet hands.

b) The Soviets were obsessed with centralized control. Soviet nuclear warheads were controlled by special units of the KGB; they never let the warheads out of Soviet territory (in those days), even in the Bloc (?): certainly they never sent them out of Warsaw Pact territory. In other words, they had a much healthier concern for the control of weapons than we did; compounded by their fear of coups, distrust of allies, and above all, their basic principle of secrecy and extreme centralization of authority. Thus Khrushchev's assurances were very plausible, and were not, in fact, questioned at all.

Indeed, it was just because of this known prudent, conservative attitude toward nuclear weapons that rumors of deployment to Cuba were initially discounted so totally by CIA analysts; it was not only outside their past behavior, it seemed totally out of character to take a risk of losing control of nuclear weapons by deployment so far from major Soviet forces, in the country of an ally so loosely controlled and apparently impulsive as Castro.



As a matter of fact, Khrushchev did send major Soviet ground units to guard the offensive missiles; but not, apparently, the SAMs, which were shortly ((or possibly, from the beginning?! Is this definitely known, yet? Check it out)) to be controlled by Cubans anyway. (Dinerstein writing in 1976 says: "It is not known whether the Soviet SAM's were first ready only 27 October or whether they were operational long before..." P. 229). Either way, how were they guarded? Presumably Soviet trainers, at least, were in control, "administratively," till the 27th. But Cuban crews were apparently being readied throughout; were they actually manning the weapons? Was Soviet "control" the same as US "control" of nuclear weapons assigned to German air crews? (See Steinbrunner).

Nevertheless, McNamara (Sloan tapes) reveals that he was continuously concerned that a US airstrike on the missiles would lead a local "2d lieutenant" to feel it was his duty to fire off one missile. Even if Sorensen's/JFK's policy of retaliating to such a single weapon by "a full retaliatory strike on the Soviet Union" was not followed (which, I suppose, would indeed have raised thoughts of a coup in some quarters) McNamara found that prospect horrendous, unbearable. (He remained forever after convinced, he explained to Blight, that it did not take 1000 missiles to be deterrent; we--he, and not only he--had been deterred by the 10th-rate, minimal force on Cuba. It didn't take 400, as he suggests in his book; maybe 20 or 30, or the assurance of one warhead.)

But given this preoccupation with the (realistic) possibility that one or more Soviet missiles might escape from Khrushchev's control under non-nuclear air attack, it is striking that it did not occur to him, or anyone else, that SAMs that were known to be scheduled eventually for Cuban control, and for whose use Castro had been screaming for days publicly, might have slipped from Soviet control! Or even short of that (as Dinerstein suggests, and McNamara's fears also indicated) from Khrushchev's control, even though still in Soviet hands.

As I pointed out to Blight, conjectures and questions like this are absolutely routine, in crises and out. In fact, that very morning, the "accidental straying" of a SAC weather U-2 over Soviet territory had occurred; we don't know to this day whether this was really accidental, but it certainly wasn't Presidentially authorized. Was it really only on the US side that such things might occur? The hawks, the Nitzes might say "Yes," but McNamara's own worry about the Soviet missileman showed he did not agree. So why did the question not occur to him, or others? Not even in the form of a doubt, a possibility: which might have led to a query, privately, by RFK: of which there is no indication.

I pointed out to Blight that this lack of speculation, by a group of officials probably more given to generating hypotheses than any other before or since, at this point in the crisis does not confirm his general thesis that the stress and fear in an

intense nuclear crisis is entirely functional and adaptive, unlike the non-nuclear crises studied by Lebow and others. At the height of the crisis, this group produced one unquestioned hypothesis, a wrong one, and drew from it the most dangerous possible inference.

The major revelation of the Oct. 27 transcript is that JFK (contrary to the implication of RFK's account: not surprisingly) wanted to accept the Saturday morning Kremlin proposal, the trade of missiles in Cuba and Turkey. Blight puts it, "He had to be held down, by others: NATO would fall apart, etc."

And of course, some felt that there was no need to pay this cost; K was sure to back down. Though: before Castro hit our low-level recon planes, scheduled for Sunday? (No) After we had hit SAMS? After we had hit missiles, invaded Cuba? Apparently.

Blight says, "Everyone assumed that we would hit SAMS if one more plane was hit." That is presumably the meaning of the mention in RFK's account, that for him and the President Saturday night, after talking to Dobrynin, "The expectation was a military confrontation on Tuesday and possibly tomorrow." (He doesn't mention, as he did to me, the warning that if another recon plane was hit, there would be an immediate strike. He probably left this out because he thought it was self-evident, or of minor importance. Ironically, since it was this part of the message which K probably found most alarming, and to which he responded by pulling out!)

JFK, then, was ready to settle: on terms that his advisors thought--probably correctly! (anyway, which doesn't prove correctness, it was what I thought myself at the time) would radically weaken our NATO alliance and convert a potential victory (as I thought, and expected, especially after the Friday night message from Khrushchev) into a defeat, a backdown under pressure.

His own response to his actual fears of general war was, after all, coherent. Keeping our missiles in Turkey for a few extra months, depriving the Soviets of the recognition of strategic parity (as he had granted at Vienna in nuclear terms: wrongly, in terms of numbers, but perhaps not as he saw it) and its fruits, symmetric "rights" of "security" in neighboring territory: all this was worth a lot, but not worth a 1/3--1/2 probability of general nuclear war.

McNamara, it seems, had already indicated willingness to make such a trade. There is a memo by Len Meeker, from an earlier day in the crisis, quoting McNamara as saying that he saw no way of getting the missiles out of Cuba (non-violently?) without giving up the missiles in Turkey, "and we would probably have to give up



Guantanamo too." (This was the minimum condition that Castro would have found acceptable, he told Szulc). As I recall Nitze's notes of the early discussions, Stevenson's heretical suggestion that Guantanamo might have to go was shared by Rusk.

By Saturday night, Rusk indicated in his letter to Blight, he certainly agreed with the President's willingness to trade the Turkish missiles publicly. In fact, he could not recall which of them made the suggestion to the other, before the President gave him the instruction. Rusk called Andrew Cordier at the UN and told him to await another call from Rusk, which would be a signal from the President. If Khrushchev did not promptly acquiesce in the President's 27 October letter (which did not mention Turkey: though Khrushchev could anticipate, from RFK's private message to Dobrynin, that if he agreed, the missiles would be removed soon from Turkey, unless he claimed credit for winning a quid pro quo) then Cordier would be called to ask U Thant to ask both sides to give up their missiles in Cuba and Turkey.

He could tell U Thant that such a proposal would be met affirmatively by the US. (Without that assurance, I would suppose, U Thant would have been unlikely to agree to make such a proposal publicly: and be subject to denunciation for siding with the Soviets and undercutting the US).

Rusk did not know whether anyone knew of this "channel" or proposal except himself, the President and Cordier. Why was he telling it now? He said he was not going to live forever (he had just had a stroke, which prevented him from coming to the March meeting). He did not want the responsibility of taking this piece of information to the grave with him. (Cordier was dead, along with the President). He wasn't sure what its significance was--since it was never delivered to U Thant--but it didn't seem right that no one would have the opportunity to reflect on this. (Why he didn't tell it earlier is obvious enough).

[Rusk's revelation]

What it means, of course, is that RFK's ultimatum to Khrushchev was not, after all, JFK's last intended word. Of course, his message to Cordier via Rusk did not commit him to carry out this course. It would, in fact, have been hard to carry it out before being challenged to hit the SAMS, if Castro worked at shooting AA at the low-flying planes. QUESTIONS: Did JFK know that Castro controlled the AA? Hadn't Castro already fired on low-level planes on Saturday? Weren't low-level flights scheduled for Sunday morning? (Or possibly, had he ordered them withheld, at least till the afternoon?) He would have had to wait at least till noon or later to give Khrushchev a chance to answer his message; RFK told Dobrynin that they must have an answer "by tomorrow." There would have been no point in preempting a possible acceptance by U Thant's premature proposal. But then, could he really signal U Thant to use this approach after another plane had been hit? Could he do it after an American air strike on the SAMS? Would he really authorise a strike on the SAMS



without a simultaneous attack on the MRBMS--as he had indicated to Dobrynin?

Probably he did imagine, or hope, that this approach could still be used after another plane had been shot down. Otherwise, he must just have crossed his fingers that Castro would not succeed in shooting down a plane before it was time--in the absence of a Khrushchev reply--to signal U Thant. Perhaps he would have signalled Cordier as soon as he learned that Castro (or someone) was firing on the low-level planes. Yet [I suspect strongly that if Castro had really shot another plane, the JCS and civilian hawks would have deterred him from trying the U Thant approach at all; or from responding affirmatively to U Thant even if the proposal were made.] In theory, he could have gone this route even after an airstrike on the SAMS (even though he assumed that this would cause Russian casualties) and the AA, if he had not yet struck the missiles: but this seems even more fanciful.

Thus, realistically--which JFK may, or may not, have appreciated--this approach depended on no US planes being hit Sunday morning, or early afternoon. And that wasn't a very good bet. JFK knew it was a risk, but after RFK's warning, he probably thought that Khrushchev could assure, almost certainly, that there would be no such provocation on Sunday (unless he wanted war).

Actually, Castro told Szulc that he had deployed all available AA on Saturday, 27 October: "I submitted to the Soviets that we could not permit the low-level flights and we were going to use the batteries. We installed all these batteries around all the SAM bases and around all the missiles, and that day we issued the order to fire. It was we who gave the orders to fire against the low-level flights." (p. 584)

"On the morning of October 27, Castro said, 'a couple of planes, or several couples of planes, appeared in low-level flight over different places, and our batteries began to fire.' Official U.S. records confirm that on that morning two low-flying reconnaissance aircraft were fired upon, but not hit, around 10 A.M., when the U-2 was shot down by a SA-2 rocket. Castro said that 'the inexperience of our artillerymen, who had recently learned to operate these pieces, probably made them miss as they fired on the low-flying aircraft.'" As for Sunday, "'I am absolutely certain that if the low-level flights had been resumed, we would have shot down one, two, or three of these planes...with so many batteries firing, we would have shot down some planes.'" (p. 585).

It would be interesting to see Szulc's whole transcript for this passage (the deletions above are in the text). Castro deceives Szulc on who shot down the U-2--he says the Russians did it, "it is still a mystery" to him why, or how it happened (he suggests that it could have been an unauthorized action! "I don't know whether the Soviet battery chief caught the spirit of our artillerymen and fired, too, or whether he received an



order...This is a question that we do not know ourselves, and we didn't want to ask much about this problem." (584). And he gives Szulc a misleading or false picture of the later firing on low-level flights after the crisis had been resolved, failing to mention that a second plane was actually downed.

Did JFK know that the AA was under the control of Castro, and that Khrushchev was effectively powerless to stop it from firing, despite RFK's ultimatum? If not, the situation is about the same with respect to the risk from the AA as from the shooting of the U-2. If so, the questions above apply. Rusk might be able to throw some light on this. McNamara would presumably know, or could find out, about the assumptions on the AA.

In any case, Rusk's revelation means that if Khrushchev had just held out another few hours--simply did not answer--he would have won. Or might have won: unless Kennedy changed his mind. And those who knew this--perhaps only Rusk, JFK (surely RFK) and Cordier--presumably expected it to go this way. But Kennedy did not implement this approach Saturday night (instead of the RFK warning/ultimatum), by telling Cordier to get in touch with U Thant at night, to make the proposal first thing in the morning (before any planes could get shot at. I keep mentioning this, but perhaps--from all the evidence we know--he wasn't really worrying about this at all, assuming the Khrushchev could control Castro's AA, and would refrain from any more SAM attacks, after RFK's warning).

He did not, after all the argument on Saturday with his advisors, give up his own belief that the Khrushchev proposal was better than an American strike on the missiles, or invasion. But he did give up the idea of accepting the proposal directly, on Saturday. (Nor did he try to "activate" U Thant on Saturday, during the day, as he could have done easily. It is not really clear how he could really have presented himself to responding in a statesmanlike manner to "U Thant's proposal" rather than to Khrushchev's, when the content would seem to be identical. And if planes had been fired on, or even hit, why would it seem less craven to accept the proposal coming from U Thant, after he had ignored it the day before?

True, he had not yet rejected it publicly; nor did most of the ExComm know of his private rejection through RFK. So perhaps he could imply that he was just running a day behind in his responses to Khrushchev: he was just getting around to the 27 October proposal on 28 October, having "accepted" the proposal of the 26th (really, the Fomin proposal) on the 27th.

Could it be that this was really behind the "Trollope ploy" of RFK all along? That Kennedy should "first" answer the Fomin/Khrushchev proposals of 26 October (hiding the Fomin channel from McCone and the ExComm behind the 26th letter); accompany this with an ultimatum, to give it a better chance. But then, if that didn't work, as it probably wouldn't, answer the second letter,



accepting it. This not only gave the hawks a chance to "save NATO" (though not, later, the Turkish missiles) and "win," but it gave JFK a somewhat better basis for overruling them on Sunday: their approach had been tried, and hadn't worked.

From this point of view, the reason that RFK's meeting with Dobrynin was kept secret from the ExComm was not just the private offer of the private removal of Turkish missiles; he would not want the hawks to know that he had made an ultimatum: they would hardly "let" him back down from it. (The statement, "This is not an ultimatum" was as important to make to his elite American audience--in case Khrushchev had alluded to it the next day--as to the Soviets, in hopes of getting their compliance. Assuming, as we now know from Rusk, it was a bluff; JFK intended, or at least contemplated and prepared, backing down from it rather than carrying it out.

But backing down from this private warning/ultimatum/bluff was one thing in the face of mere failure of Khrushchev to respond affirmatively. Backing down from the "subsidiary" precise threat to hit SAMS if another recon plane was hit would have seemed quite another, close to impossible.

Note the inevitable equivocality of a private warning, no matter how precise the deadline. Khrushchev could interpret the secrecy as making it easier for him to comply without maximum loss of face, without publicly caving in to a threat. That looks serious. (A public, sharply-worded ultimatum was more likely to look not so much like a threat as a simple precursor to attack, justifying it before world and domestic opinion.) But a warning could also be private--as, it now turns out, in this very case--in order to make it easier for the threatener to back out of it if it failed, without losing face for this in front of his public or his own officials and elites. In other words, Dobrynin would have been entitled to wonder--at least, in future crises, after he reads the Rusk letter--whether the privacy of the threat (as in many nuclear crises) is meant to keep the secret of it from high officials in the US government as well as from the US public (and from SU officials and public).

But even if he had wondered, and doubted to some extent, he could not afford to test this threat. He should have figured (and he acted as if he did) that even if Kennedy thought he was bluffing (as he apparently did!) Kennedy would probably discover that he had not been bluffing after all, when his planes were shot down. (The Bluff That Might Have Blown It.) And Khrushchev couldn't keep that from happening--except by starting to dismantle the missiles at first light in Cuba. Which is what he did.

Kennedy was ready to settle on Saturday morning; he understood that his own fear of nuclear war--wholly realistic and sane--was inconsistent with a willingness to accept a high risk of it for these stakes. And his estimate of the risks, so perplexing to the hawks (who felt vindicated in their own estimates, that the



risks had been negligible, by the outcome) was more realistic than he ever knew. Yet despite this, he let himself be overruled (privately, only for 18 hours or so) by his Cold Warrior advisors: even though the decision was his, and his sense of the risks, stakes and the incongruity of his official demands in the light of these was vivid.

That this could happen--that even a President with these realistic fears of nuclear war and ultimate willingness to accept even humiliation rather than initiate combat leading to it, was surrounded by such advisors and, predictably, deferred to them even temporarily--demonstrates the dangers of the nuclear era, now as then, even before weapons move into the hands of "madmen." The "reasonable" Russian Bolsheviks put their weapons near the hands of the world's then most famous "madman," who managed to put his hands on them.

The "liberal, dovish, weak" President (his instructions to Rusk could only have confirmed the worst suspicions of the JCS after the Bay of Pigs; if they had been followed, we would be referring to Cuba II as Bay of Pigs II, if not Bay of Pigs squared) chose, in his moment of greatest fear, to give an unprecedented ultimatum. And to postpone his abandonment of it for nearly a day, thinking he had that much time to change it before he lost control of events. Not knowing that he did not have 18 hours till then, control had already been lost by him: it was really up to Khrushchev or Castro.

Without the U2 shootdown, there would have been no ultimatum Saturday night. With the shootdown, but without the ultimatum, Khrushchev would have hung tough on Sunday: so the President believed. (He expected that even with the ultimatum). If a Soviet had shot down the U2, but the SAMs were firmly back in control, Khrushchev would probably have followed the President's expectations, rejected or delayed answering the President's letter and even his ultimatum, perhaps making counterthreats or moves: and (perhaps without ever having expected it) won. But as it was, Khrushchev realized he did not have hours to wait, if he was to avoid losing control to Castro's blind initiative. He could not wait and see if Kennedy was serious. He had to act immediately.